Activism and symbolic capital in Western Australia: an ethnographic study of the anti-nuclear movement

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I, Katharina Wolf, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for award of Doctor of Philosophy, Murdoch University, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Katharina Wolf
Abstract

This study sets out to address the current gap in PR activism literature, by providing insight into one of the currently most visible activist communities in Western Australia. It investigates the social role and communication activities of activists in the context of the Western Australian anti-nuclear debate. During the period of research, February 2009 to June 2011, Western Australia (WA) was a major global supplier of natural resources, whose profits underpinned the strong economic performance of Australia during and after the 2007 global financial crisis. With worldwide demand for uranium ore (a core component required for the production of nuclear energy) increasing during this period, the state of Western Australia reversed a long held ban on uranium mining and thus found itself propelled to the forefront of the global anti-nuclear debate. This, in turn, led to the reinvigoration of the Western Australian anti-nuclear movement (ANM), which already had a more than thirty year history of protest and opposition to any use of nuclear technology. The study took place within this context, setting out to understand how WA ANM activists communicate and how they challenge the industry and economic focused discourse in WA society.

Research followed an ethnographic approach to explore the activities, interests and motivations of activists affiliated with the Western Australian anti-nuclear movement. A range of methods were employed, including participant observation for multiple, extensive periods at the movement’s planning meetings and public actions; 30 interviews with ANM activists; and also qualitative document analysis of activist texts, such as flyers and brochures, plus media coverage, such as newspaper articles, online reports, and broadcast programs, including audiences' comments and consequent discussions.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of practice, and in particular his notion of symbolic capital, the study found that activists like those involved in the WA anti-nuclear movement lack intrinsic resources and consequently power, and therefore rely on mobilising the wider community in order to bring about change. Hence, activists’ role in society is not essentially linked to campaign successes, but instead to the existence of activists and activist organisations and their ability to challenge priorities, norms and assumptions.

Knowledge about activist communications in the field of public relations has to date been dominated by a research focus on established, not-for-profit organisations with corporation-like structures, including formal public relations departments. There has been little research on social movements or fluid, informal activist groups. Also, the prevailing emphasis on the corporate perspective in relation to activism has led to previous research focusing on factors such as how companies might limit the potential damage done by activist groups. This study contributes to an understanding of grassroots activist communications from the activist perspective. The first-hand insights gained in this study challenge some of the major
assumptions about activism in the existing public relations literature, most notably the notion that ‘excellent’ public relations involves a compromise between activists and corporations. Instead, it finds that activists perform a crucial role in society that extends well beyond the impact of those individual companies that may be targeted during the course of an activist campaign. Furthermore, the study challenges the claims of some critical scholars that activists should be studied as public relations professionals in their own right. Instead, the research finds that there are considerable differences between the skills, resources and power of activist organisations and those of the public relations departments of corporations. Thus a comparison of activist communications and public relations is misleading and flawed within the context of PR scholarship. Activists may be expert communicators, but they are essentially powerless, and thus rely on community support in order to accumulate sufficient symbolic capital that will allow them to encourage and facilitate change.

The findings of this study have transferability beyond the context of Western Australia's uranium mining and its role in the global nuclear power supply. This thesis argues that activists play a crucial role in society because by challenging the status quo, they encourage and foster active involvement by citizens in democratic decision making. They do this not only by questioning existing power structures and priorities, but also by providing citizens with a mechanism that enables their engagement with the democratic process. By illuminating and voicing crucial societal issues, and encouraging citizens to take a stance, activists challenge the moral compass at the heart of society.
The writing of this thesis has been one of the most significant challenges I have ever had to face. However, I am extremely fortunate to have been in good company throughout this journey.

I would like to thank my two supervisors, Associate Professor Christine Daymon and Dr Kathryn Trees, for their guidance, support and continuous enthusiasm. It has been a wonderful experience to work with two people, who have brought very different, but complementary perspectives to this study. I would specifically like to thank Christine for encouraging me to think beyond the confines of this PhD.

I consider it an honour to have had Dr Kristin Demetrious as an associate supervisor. Always encouraging, Kristin has posed those questions that forced me to re-asses, question and challenge my thinking.

The academic community has been incredibly supportive during this journey. I appreciate the words of encouragement and constructive feedback that I have received at academic conferences, most notably the 2013 ICA conference in London.

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My parents and grandparents have been an incredible source of strength, providing unquestionable support since the day I announced that I had not only decided to go to university after all, but also that I would be embarking on this journey overseas. Thank you for always encouraging me to follow my dreams.

Last, but definitely not least, I like to acknowledge the many active citizens, advocates and activists that I crossed paths with during the course of this study. Thank you for enabling me to become involved, for sharing your personal journeys and observations, and for challenging me and my personal values on many occasions.

I dedicate this thesis to Johno, one of the most generous, kind and unique characters I have ever met. Johno unexpectedly passed away in January 2012. However, the “Mad Hatter” has made a lasting impression.
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<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>action</strong></td>
<td>Public display of protest, such as a demonstration, sit in, distribution of information flyers or publicity stunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>activist</strong></td>
<td>Individual, who opposes or supports a particular cause and actively seeks to have their voice heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALP</strong></td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ANAWA</strong></td>
<td>Anti Nuclear Alliance of WA</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ANFA</strong></td>
<td>Australian Nuclear Free Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ANM</strong></td>
<td>Anti-Nuclear Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUMP</strong></td>
<td>Ban Uranium Permanently (campaign)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clown Army</strong></td>
<td>Group of grassroots activists that employ clowning as a means to highlight perceived shortcomings in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FANG</strong></td>
<td>Fremantle Anti Nuclear Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GFC</strong></td>
<td>Global Financial Crisis (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grassroots activism</strong></td>
<td>Political or other activities that take place on a local level, based on the interests and involvement of a community, as opposed to a regional or national organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ICAN</strong></td>
<td>International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Labor Party</strong></td>
<td>The Australian Labor Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LGBTQ</strong></td>
<td>Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MAPW</strong></td>
<td>Medical Association for Prevention of War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MP</strong></td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MPI</strong></td>
<td>Mineral Policy Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neoliberalism</strong></td>
<td>Political orientation that blends liberal political views with an emphasis on economic growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NFP</strong></td>
<td>National Disarmament Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NGO</strong></td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation, e.g. Friends of the Earth, Amnesty International,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>NDT</td>
<td>Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWS</td>
<td>Nuclear Weapon State (as recognised by the UN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PND</td>
<td>People for Nuclear Disarmament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RANG</td>
<td>Rockingham Anti Nuclear Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Movement</td>
<td>A diverse group of individuals and groups with a common ideology who seek social change in relation to a particular issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Greens</td>
<td>The Australian Green Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Liberals</td>
<td>The Australian Liberal Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>WANFA</td>
<td>Western Australian Nuclear Free Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>WWF</td>
<td>World Wildlife Fund</td>
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